

Remembering Bethany K. Dumas

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The language and law community mourns the passing of Bethany Dumas, a long-time scholar and activist in forensic linguistics and a good friend and supportive colleague to many. Bethany died on June 22, 2021 at the age of 83. Originally a Texan, Bethany traversed a number of southern states to earn her academic credentials and teach—in Arkansas, Missouri, Louisiana, Texas, and ultimately Tennessee, where she researched and taught at the flagship UT campus in Knoxville for over 40 years. As Bethany recounts, it was at the University of Arkansas that she decided on linguistics as her area of specialization and where in 1971 she earned her PhD in the field. Fifteen years later, Bethany earned her JD at the UT law school— a qualification that enhanced her scholarly and professional impact at the interface of language and law.

A glance at Bethany’s CV reveals the productive work of a scholar in a wide range of academic and pedagogical domains: college writing, bilingual education, women’s studies, dialectology, language variation, and—of course—linguistics. Along the way, Bethany even published a memoir about E.E. Cummings, whom she had serendipitously befriended.

It was in forensic linguistics, however, that Bethany distinguished herself – both academically and professionally. Bethany was an early contributor in the formative years of the field as a distinct discipline – beginning with a 1985 conference paper on the linguist as expert witness. In her prolific publication history, Bethany brought analytical expertise and insight to a remarkable array of topics: consumer product warnings, voice identification, authorship attribution, semantics in the judicial process, plain legal language, statutory interpretation, dialect variation in legal settings, courtroom discourse, and jury instructions—about which Bethany was a tireless advocate for reform, especially in capital cases. Notably, her mastery of issues in comprehensibility was solicited by the Tennessee judiciary in their rewriting of pattern jury instructions. In addition, Bethany’s forensic expertise was employed in over 60 legal cases.

Bethany was a faithful representative for forensic linguistics at the Law and Society Association and a valued presence at gatherings of the International Association of Forensic Linguists. Her broad experience, wide-ranging knowledge, and analytical acumen made her a leader and mentor to both emerging colleagues and students of linguistics. Impromptu conversations at academic conferences revealed a seasoned profes-

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sional who was genuinely interested in the work of others and always inclined toward encouraging and supporting her fellow scholars – many of whom came to know here as a warm and caring friend.